

Title: Paws to Reflect: A Novel Approach for Frontline Caregiver Support

Authors:

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In the uncertainty of the healthcare landscape since 2020, frontline caregivers of all backgrounds have been struggling to find balance, solace, and respite. The Paws to Reflect program was developed as a novel, evidence-informed approach to peer support that uses animal assisted therapy to lower the barrier to entry on difficult, often stigmatized conversations.

A committee with representation from well-being, nursing, ethics, volunteer services, and innovations collected data representing the voices of over 1,500 employees, including ways they'd like to be supported. Analysis indicated that increased presence of the patient-facing pet therapy program brought moments of joy throughout the shift and was requested more frequently. This group did a literature review and noted the strong evidence supporting efficacy of both animal-assisted therapy and peer support modalities in hospital employees. The idea grew from these data to create a novel program that joins pet therapy with peer support for the enhanced emotional support of our employees.

In partnership with volunteer services and internal/external communications, Geisinger's Center for Well-being recruited 15 dog/handler pairs using a variety of marketing approaches across our 7-county footprint. These handlers round alongside one of our over 200 M-PATH peer supporters. Peer supporters use those pet therapy opportunities to ask open questions to our employees (i.e. "how are things going here?", "how are you doing?", "I hear it's been a tough week, what support do you need?"). This generates space and opportunity for employees to seek support and resources, removing the barriers to resource navigation that are often present for frontline teams.

The program launched in May of 2023. In its first 6 months, "Paws and Peers" were able to reach over 200 work units, representing direct interactions with over 800 employees. Mood pulse surveys were collected before and after these interactions, and showed a 92% rate of mood improvement from pre-visit to post-visit. We also noted a 100% response rating of mood being either "somewhat good" or "excellent" post-visit (4 and 5 on the Likert scale), and a 0% rate of response indication of mood decrease from pre-visit to post-visit. These rounding teams have also been activated to round in response to internal crises and have formally become an activation arm of our hospital crisis response team.

The Paws to Reflect Program has been a significant vehicle for support, resource navigation, and joy for our employee population. By leveraging volunteer pet therapy handlers and volunteer peer supporters, the ongoing maintenance and recruitment of the program are extremely cost effective. While the systemic drivers of burnout cannot be addressed by pet therapy or peer support alone, there's significant value to be found in shifting towards a culture where supportive conversations, intentional respite, and moments of meaning can be infused in the day. By taking the direct feedback of staff and creating a novel structure to deliver on their requests, we continue to facilitate spaces of dialogue that say "We're here, we're listening. We're ready to support you. What can we do next?"